Restoration

Fire-damaged Akron church could have a new beginning

University of Akron planning to turn over historic structure to entity that would restore it.

By Katie Byard
Beacon Journal/Ohio.com

There is new hope that the fire-damaged historic church on the University of Akron campus can be preserved and given new life.

But it won’t be the university saving the 100-plus-year-old former St. Paul’s Episcopal Church at Forge and Market streets.

Instead, UA is looking to pass along the property — the oldest portion of which dates to 1885 — to an entity that would save and restore it.

“I’m pretty convinced structurally it’s OK and it can be repurposed,” said Dana Noel, president of Progress Through Preservation of Greater Akron.

The nonprofit group, which has long been concerned about the property, has suggested to UA officials that it temporarily take over ownership and work to find an individual or group willing to invest in restoring it.

Noel envisions it being used as office or performance space, or possibly housing a micro-brewery or restaurant.

“Keeping it is super important,”

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Church

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Noel said of the stone-and-wood structure at 354 E. Market St. that local preservationists consider to be one of the most significant old structures remaining in the city.

"There's nothing like something old and tangible, and when it's gone, it's gone," Noel said.

A stained-glass window that was designed by Tiffany Studios and is in the newer section was spared in the April 18 fire.

Nathan Mortimer, UA's vice president for finance and administration, praised the work of the Akron firefighters April 18, saying they worked hard to keep flames from the newer portion of the building.

Noel said it is unlikely the structure would be returned to religious uses. Many congregations are contracting and consolidating, he noted, and it would be a hefty investment to restore and maintain the property.

Waiting for renewal

To passers-by, it may appear not much is going on with the church — a chain-link construction fence erected after the fire still surrounds the property. Ground-floor windows that were broken out in the fire remain boarded up. A good portion of the roof is open to the sky.

But behind the scenes, the university is looking into selling off or essentially giving away the property to an entity.

"Certainly construction and rehabilitation hasn’t happened. But there’s a process that we’re beginning," Mortimer said.

He added that the university recognizes "the heritage of the building and its importance to the Akron community."

But, he said, "we just don't have the wherewithal to rehab the building."

The oldest portion of the church opened in 1889 as a parish hall and Sunday school. The new portion opened in 1900. The two buildings are connected by a wood-frame walkway.

In 1947, the Beacon Journal called a wedding there "the biggest society wedding in Akron history."

Martha Firestone, granddaughter of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co. founder Harvey S. Firestone, married William Clay Ford, the grandson of the late Henry Ford, at the church on June 21, 1947.

The university, which purchased the complex in 1952, mothballed it in 1979.

That year, the university moved its Ballet Center from the property to a new addition at Guzzetta Hall on the UA campus.

Heavily damaged in an April 18 fire, the former St. Paul's Episcopal Church at East Market and Forge streets, photographed Friday in Akron. | PHIL MASTURZO/Akron Beacon Journal/Ohio.com Photos

The University of Akron plans to turn over ownership of the former St. Paul's Episcopal Church to a preservation group that hopes to save and restore it.
Race against time

Mortimer and Noel said last week that it is critical to get some work done to protect the property before the winter. “Half the roof is gone,” because of the fire, said Noel, a contractor who specializes in restoration. “I worry that as it sits there it is vulnerable. When the winter comes, if it’s not protected, you are going to get that freeze and thaw cycle... water is the real culprit in winter.”

Mortimer noted that UA must gain state approval to transfer the property.

He envisions a request-for-proposals process. Progress Through Preservation, he said, “will have the opportunity to respond to the request. No timeline has been set. He said it’s too soon to say if the university would sell the building for essentially nothing.

Noel said “to deal with everything you have there,” the building would have to be passed along “for a very minimal amount.”

Through the years...

Here is a history of the former Akron church damaged in an April fire on the University of Akron campus.

1884: St. Paul’s Episcopal congregation purchases a triangular lot at East Market, Forge and Fir streets and builds a stone parish and Sunday school building. An adjoining structure dates to 1909.

1952: The University of Akron, with a gift of $165,000 from the Firestone family (of Firestone Tire & Rubber Co.), purchases the property for its music department. UA moves in after the new St. Paul’s at 1361 W. Market St. in West Akron is consecrated.

1976: The music department moves to a new building on the UA campus and the old St. Paul’s becomes the Ballet Center. The 1885 structure is entered in the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Register of Historic Places.

2006: The University of Akron’s dance program moves to a new addition at Guzzetta Hall and UA leaves the property.

For a time after the university mothballed the property, it was leased to a local McDonald’s franchisee for possible reuse. That lease is no longer in effect, allowing the university to find another tenant.

Progress Through Preservation, Noel said, is forming an ad hoc committee whose members have the needed expertise. The committee’s plan is to first come up with a “make-safe-and-dry program” to protect the building. Then the committee would create a feasibility study to market the property to outside investors. The feasibility study would include potential reuses and costs of preservation and redevelopment. The study also would identify possible methods of financing, including federal and state historic preservation tax credits.

There’s a lot going on downtown, and I think there would be interest in the church, Noel said. “There’s interest in people discovering the city center, developing these old buildings.”

Last week, the city revealed that an undisclosed developer plans to buy the 11-story city-owned CitiCenter for up to $2.6 million. The building, at 146 S. High St., opened as the Akron YWCA in 1933. The CitiCenter gym will close Tuesday; various city offices will be emptied by the end of August.

Meanwhile, among other downtown redevelopment happenings, the Bowery Development project downtown aims to renovate and reuse six empty, blighted buildings fronting South Main Street next to the Akron Civic Theatre. The Bowery Development Group hopes to close on all of the financing in the next 60 to 90 days, with construction to start soon after.

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